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ABSTRACT

While there has been a great deal of debate about enlarging the canon, less attention has been paid to how students respond to "new" literary figures such as Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, or to how instructors should incorporate them into an already cramped literature survey course. Instructors must consider some questions that are probably not of concern to students, such as whether students find it as important to read texts authored by women as the instructor does in his or her critical role; whether their understanding of those women-authored texts changes their understanding of the course as a whole; or, whether one combination of texts from the Middle Ages is about the same as another. A study examined these questions by distributing in a medieval literature course a seven-question survey to be completed anonymously and for extra credit. Results showed both the men and the women of the class found the texts by women important to the success of the course. For instance, in response to the first question ("The typical way to present the ideas or values of this period would be to rely on readings from Chaucer and "Sir Gawain." Would this approach have been a good method in this course?"), nearly all answered no. The majority said they found the readings by women important and thought-provoking; nearly all students liked Margery Kempe's reading more than that of Julian of Norwich. (TB)

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Ann R. Hawkins

ED 387 822

Testing the Canon: Student Responses to Texts by Medieval Women in English Literature Surveys.

While there has been a great deal of critical debate about enlarging or altering the canon, less attention has been paid to how students respond to "new" literary figures such as Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, or how instructors incorporate them into an already cramped literature survey. The uncertainty about how to teach these writers is reflected, for example, in the instructor's guide, Teaching with the Norton Anthology of English Literature (6th ed.). The guide acknowledges the critical debate that surrounds the representation of women in literature "from a male point of view" and the problems this causes with students believing that "authorship is essentially a male prerogative." But in its ensuing discussion of women in the medieval period, the Guide itself privileges the male-authored texts over the female: Margery Kempe is discussed solely as a "complemen[t]" to the Wife of Bath; Julian of Norwich is given her own short paragraph at the end of the discussion since she "does not fit into any of the medieval types or stereotypes of women or of religious experience" (122, 123). This contradictory attitude bespeaks a certain distinction between how critics respond to enlarging the canon and the practical considerations involved in diversifying the texts read in literature surveys.

In such a quandary, the instructor must consider important questions about student response that critics are free from: Do my students find it as important to read texts authored by women as I do in my critical role? Does their understanding of those women-authored texts change their understanding of the course as a whole? or is—to them—one combination of texts from the Middle Ages about the same as any other?

I attempted to answer such questions in my classes by taking two steps. First I included a small unit on saints' lives and spiritual autobiography, using excerpts from Margery Kempe's Book; Julian of Norwich's discussion of "God the Mother" from her Showings; and the

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anonymous St. Erkenwald. While Margery's reading appeared in the student's anthology (the Norton 5th ed), the other two texts I provided as handouts. (Interestingly, my addition of Julian of Norwich seems in line with adaptations other instructor have made: the newest edition (1993) of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. 1., now includes a different excerpt from Showings). Then at the end of the semester, students evaluated their reactions to these readings in a long project that required thorough and thoughtful responses. The students' project assessed only their attitudes and reactions to the medieval women we had read and their reactions to those women's texts in the context of other medieval words we had read. The issue was not, however, their understanding of the role of women, but rather their understanding of the period as a whole. The question that students answered time and again was "if you hadn't read this text, would your understanding of the period be the same or different." Their answers to that question (and the others) are thought-provoking, and in some cases surprising.

Profile of Students

Students taking the course—"British Literature I, Anglo-Saxon through Eighteenth Century"—were predominately sophomores at a large state university in a relatively conservative area. The classes were fairly evenly divided between English majors required to take the course and non-majors fulfilling their general education requirements.

Methodology of Student Project

To encourage student participation, I presented the survey/discussion sheets as an extra credit project, replacing up to 5% of a previous grade. Students were allowed to choose from all the course requirements which grade to enhance. But this presented several problems—to get the full, thoughtful responses I desired I had to provide credit; but to get the honest responses I desired I had to provide anonymity. To resolve this dilemma, I established the following procedure (which received overwhelming student approval):

1) Extra credit projects had to be typed—to ensure I wouldn't recognize handwriting.
2) Projects were due the day after the final. I assured students that their grades would be already averaged before I looked at the projects, ensuring that project responses could not adversely affect students' final grades.
3) Students typed their social security number on the back of the project. Credit of 1 to 5% was assigned solely on the basis of thoroughness of response: "Yes" and "no" receiving no better than one percent, two to three sentences receiving 5%. I read through the responses and assigned a percentage, writing that percentage on the back.

This procedure allowed me to assign credit to the appropriate student by matching up the social security numbers without ever looking at the ideas that the student had espoused. As a result, too, I had a good response—57% the first semester, 58% the second. Furthermore, the responses offered a representative sampling of students and grade ranges.

Results of the Project

I have organized student responses under the following six areas.

I. Survey Question: *The typical way to present the ideas or values or genres of this period is to rely on readings from Chaucer and Sir Gawain. Would this have been a good method in our course? Why or why not?*

In response to this question, 98% of the men and 92% of the women answer "no"—that relying on Chaucer and Sir Gawain was not a good method for our course. The majority of students found the readings by women important and thought-provoking. Interestingly some of the strongest support for the inclusion of woman-authored texts came from men. Their reasons for this response fell into two areas: the additional texts were important "for variety" and "to include women".

	For Variety	To Include Women
Men:	60%	30%
Women:	40%	40%

And when students asked for more information about the Middle Ages, it was usually in areas of women/gender or lifestyle/occupations.

	Women/Gender	Lifestyles/Occupations
Men:	33%	16.7%
Women:	50%	25%

Students requested additional information on other areas—such as genres, religion, the supernatural, and courtly love—less consistently.

II. Survey Question: *Were these texts good/ helpful/ interesting additions? How?*

Almost all (99%) of the students found the added texts either interesting, helpful, or both. The primary criteria for wanting to retain Margery Kempe and Julian Norwich seemed to be their "truth" or verisimilitude, a standard against which to hold the false (not real) women in Chaucer and Sir Gawain. (Interestingly few of the students remembered that Margery Kempe's narrative was recorded by a male scribe.) Most students found Margery not a "complement" to the Wife of Bath—as the Norton teacher's guide terms her—but a corrective. Most said that they found the Wife easy to disbelieve—and thus to pass off in a discussion of women—because she was fictional, but that Margery let them know that what "real people" were like: "It is not until we read about it [subjugation of woman] from the actual person that we begin to understand." I record here some representative comments:

- "Margery Kempe and Julian were good additions to the "Wife of Bath's Tale" because they gave relatively non-fiction accounts of women in the Middle Ages who did not fit the stereotypes of the time. Women of the time were considered only good for courting as in Sir Gawain or the "Franklin's Tale," but these two women gave themselves another purpose."

- "Although Wife of Bath was somewhat independent, she was presented in a comical light taking away her credibility."
- "Chaucer and Sir Gawain deal with a fantasy or fairy tale. Margery Kempe on the other hand deals with real life situations and realistic settings that the reader would not experience in other readings. Margery Kempe provides a better understanding of pilgrimage; the Wife of Bath only goes to find a new husband."

III. Survey Question: *Did you like Margery Kempe's reading or not? Why?*

Only 1% of the students did not like Margery Kempe. One objected on religious grounds, finding that Margery Kempe was a fanatic, therefore an "unfair depiction" of religious people. Another objected to Margery's character as a woman: "She was crazy, irrational, and a disgrace to women." The remaining of students—the strong majority—cited a variety of items they found admirable in Margery's character:

- her business enterprises;
- her ability to "con her husband into not sleeping with her and to argue with the Archbishop";
- her religious devotion;
- her ability to tell a good story;
- her verisimilitude: she "gave examples of real situations for families of the times"

Again from a student: "I liked this reading because I had not been exposed to it in high school, and it was a unique piece, I think, for the Middle Ages. Also, it was nice to read something about an average person (well, kind of average) rather than a hero or a citizen (male) of social importance. Margery Kempe included numerous references to family and self, which made the period seem more "real." And this is written in a fairly easy-to-read style that made reading it enjoyable and fairly effortless, as opposed to having to dig through our anthology's [Middle English] version of Chaucer."

IV. Survey Question: *Did you like Julian of Norwich's reading or not? Why?*

Julian of Norwich did not receive as overwhelmingly strong support as Margery Kempe. This reaction was in part my fault since I choose a selection that was more philosophical than narrative. Since the surveyed classes, I have found that students respond better to excerpts from Showings that include more biographical information (like those in the 6th edition of the Norton).

Student responses tended to divide along gender lines in their responses to Julian of Norwich: only 1% of men liked her compared to 50% of the women. The majority of students tended to dislike two aspects of Julian's writing:

- her idea of God the Mother was disorienting and even uncomfortable; and
- her style was too sermonlike and sometimes boring.

Of those who liked Julian, 66% listed her "female point of view" and the rest cited the religious or moral lessons her text provided. This later group tended to compare Julian's reading positively to that of Margery Kempe:

> "Julian of Norwich contrasts with Margery Kempe by showing a more accepted role for Christian women as a religious recluse. I also liked it because it describes God not as a traditionally make figure but as a female, a nurturing figure"

Additionally, one student also noted positively that Julian's text helped her better understand other texts in the genre of the dream-vision. Of the students who liked Julian, most still ranked her text lower than either Margery Kempe's or St. Erkenwald.

V. Survey Question: *Do the readings from Julian and Margery combine together well or not? Why or why not?*

Most students found Julian a good combination with Margery, asserting that the two readings reinforced and complimented one another. Their points of comparison tended to the positive:

- Both were women with beliefs that drastically differ from those of "normal" (or rather, modern) society

- Both complement each other: "Margery Kempe's making a statement about women's role in the church and Julian's trying to show Jesus as a maternal figure."
- Both texts were woman-based: they do not show woman as the temptress or wrongdoer (as in Sir Gawain and Chaucer), but as one who is as intelligent and capable of loving God as any man.

Two students, however, asserted that the two women and their texts provide negative impressions either of Christians or of women in general:

- "Reading both Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich could lead a person to believe that all Christians were fanatics who lacked themselves in rooms and scratched their skin off"
- "I think they both stink. Neither one made me feel women were strong, just that they were crazy."

VI. Survey Question: *What do you understand differently about the Middle Ages because these texts were included? Explain.*

Most surprising of the responses was the students' statements of how these readings changed the impression they would have had of Middle Ages. Without these texts, 50% of the students stated that they wouldn't have known the importance of religion in the period.

- "Chaucer and Sir Gawain focus too heavily on romance for there to be any truly noticeable religious meaning in the story"
- "The majority of the religious characters in the Canterbury Tales are displayed in a satiric light—for example, the Prioress with her dogs. But in the other stories we got the idea that there were good people in the church."

Several found that these women's texts countered other misconceptions they would have had of the period. One student's comments seem to sum up this position quite well:

> Only teaching Chaucer and Sir Gawain probably would not have been a good idea because those two would serve to reinforce some preconceptions that people have that say the Middle Ages was a barbaric time of knights, fighting, religious fanatics, and any

combination thereof. . . . Chaucer's pilgrims spinning their tales of knights and ladies—especially the Franklin's happily ever after tale where the knight is ready to give up his wife but doesn't have to—are not much better at dispelling stereotypes that say the Middle Ages was an ignorant period. Something which does not set out solely to entertain should be included, such as Julian of Norwich.

VII. Survey Questions: *Would you include Margery's text in future survey classes? Why or why not? Would you include Julian's text in future survey classes? Why or why not?*

When asked whether Margery and Julian should continue to be included in a literature survey, 50% of students answered yes for both texts. The majority found both texts important, especially in a discussion of women. One student even remarked that these women's texts were "radically different (in a positive way) from what I expected in this class."

Observations

I noticed, both in teaching the course and in assessing the surveys, that students often had significant problems in stepping outside their own cultural assumptions to meet the Middle Ages on its own terms.

- First, students had considerable difficulty understanding that the Middle Ages was not on the Information Superhighway. Few could accept that more information about Margery and Julian isn't available; instead, many preferred to think I was in a conspiracy with the Norton editors when I answered "we don't know."
- Second, students—particularly the women—seemed to want to remake Margery in the image of a modern feminist. In the eyes of a number of students, she became a woman who "has control and ownership of her own body."

The value of the responses outlined above is that they can help instructors to better craft syllabi to include selections that will both challenge and appeal to their students. Overall, what students tended to value most was a good story—St. Erkenwald ranked very high. Margery's Book as a

story wasn't considered quite as good, but that lack was made up by the fact that it was "true." Knowing, then, that students desire both a good plot and historical "truth," in subsequent sections I have included with good success Margery's story of meeting Julian.

In closing I would like to share two student statements that seem to me almost cautionary for those of us working to widen the curriculum in useful and pedagogically appropriate way.

- *On using handouts to supplement the course text*—One student remarked that like his fellow classmates, "when I'm handed extra handouts, I consider it rather burdensome (speaking honestly). . . I myself witness the importance of putting their works in the anthology because particularly in my case I would not have read them." In light of the fact that--regardless of our best efforts—students continue to regard the course text as canonical, we need to have texts we consider important anthologized and not rely on using supplementary handouts.
- *On the importance of including women in the course*—The essay portion of the final asked students to discuss the importance of women or women's roles in the texts we had read. On her way out, a female English major commented that instructors frequently listed such questions on their pre-exam review sheets, but that "students know those questions don't show up on the test." If we are committed as teachers to being more inclusive in our courses, in having students read and know well women's texts, we need to place that material on tests as well as on the reading schedule.

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